practical effect, and they leave the prospects of the future undetermined . . . This treaty ignores the economic solidarity of Europe, and by aiming at the economic life of Germany it threatens the health and prosperity of the Allies themselves . . . by making demands the execution of which is in the literal sense impossible, it stultifies itself and leaves Europe more unsettled than it found it.

Source: J. M. Keynes, *The economic consequences of the peace*, London, 1920

3.4 Reparations against Germany: an American view

The opinion of an American delegate at the Paris Peace Conference

The magnitude of the reparations demanded of Germany under the treaty . . . placed great strain upon credit. Largely on this account there was a widespread collapse of the entire pre-war system of goods and services and investments. The pre-war gold system has collapsed and a large part of the world functions in terms of closed international dealings restricted to barter . . . The reparations clauses contributed largely toward a German psychology which has changed the political complexion of much of the world.

Source: J. F. Dulles, 'Foreword', in P. Burnett, *Reparations at the Paris Peace Conference*, New York, 1940

3.5 The Paris Peace Settlement: a communist view

From a contemporary communist pamphlet

The imperialist war of 1914 demonstrated with the greatest clarity to all enslaved nations and oppressed classes of the entire world the falseness of bourgeois-democratic phraseology. Both sides used the phrases of national liberation and the right of national self-determination to make good their case, but the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest on one side, and the treaties of Versailles and St Germain on the other, showed that the victorious bourgeoisie quite ruthlessly determine 'national' frontiers in accordance with their economic interests . . . The so-called League of Nations is nothing but the insurance contract by which the victors of war mutually guarantee each other's spoils . . . The League of Nations and the entire post-war policy of the imperialist states discloses this truth even more sharply and clearly, everywhere intensifying the struggle of the proletariat of the advanced countries and of the labouring classes in the colonies, accelerating the destruction of petty-bourgeois national illusions about the possibility of peaceful coexistence and of the equality of nations under capitalism.

Source: A. Adamthwaite, *The lost peace: international relations in Europe, 1918–39*, London, 1980, pp. 39–41

3.6 The Paris Peace Settlement: a British assessment

The view of a British delegate at the Paris Peace Conference

The historian, with every justification, will come to the conclusion that we were very stupid men. I think we were . . . We came to Paris confident that the new world order was about to be established; we left it convinced the new order had fouled the old . . . We arrived determined that a peace of justice and wisdom should be negotiated: we left it conscious that the treaties imposed were neither just nor wise . . . It is impossible to read German criticism without deriving the impression that the Paris Peace Conference was guilty of disguising an imperialist peace under the surface of Wilsonism . . . Hypocrisy was the predominant and inescapable result . . . We had accepted a system for others which, when it came to practice, we should refuse to apply to ourselves.

Source: H. Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, New York, 1939

Document case-study questions

1 Identify the major criticisms made of the Treaty of Versailles by John Maynard Keynes in 3.3.

2 What does 3.2 tell us about Hitler's reaction to the treaty?

3 How far did the Treaty of Versailles reflect Clemenceau's views as outlined in 3.1?

4 Comment on the way in which the League of Nations is dealt with in 3.5.

5 According to 3.4, what is the major weakness of the Treaty of Versailles?

6 To what extent does Nicolson's assessment in 3.6 conform to your own view of the peace settlement?

7 Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of all the above documents as historical sources.

Notes and references

1 Quoted in A. Adamthwaite, *The making of the Second World War*, London, 1977, p. 36.

2 J. Joll, *Europe since 1870*, London, 1973, pp. 196–238; P. M. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers*, London, 1988, pp. 330–54.

3 There is extensive literature on the Paris Peace Settlement. Historians whose works take a sympathetic view include A. Adamthwaite, *The lost peace: international relations, 1918–39*, London, 1980; R. Henig, *Versailles and after, 1919–33*, London, 1984; G. Ross, *The great powers and the decline of the European states system, 1914–45*, London, 1983; and M. Trachtenberg, 'Versailles after sixty years', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 16 (1982). For critical accounts, see E. H. Carr, *International relations between the wars, 1919–39*, London, 1948; S. Marks, *The illusion of peace: international relations in Europe, 1918–33*, London, 1979; and A. J. P. Taylor, *The origins of the Second World War*, London, 1961.

4 P. Mantoux, *Paris Peace Conference, 1919: proceedings of the Council of Four*, Geneva, 1964, pp. 24–29.

5 A. Lentin, *The Versailles Peace Conference: peacemaking with Germany*, London, 1991.

6 For details of the treaties, see J. Grenville (ed.), *The major international treaties, 1914–73*, London, 1974.

7 A. Polonsky, *The little dictators: the history of eastern Europe since 1918*, London, 1975.

8 See R. Henig (ed.), *The League of Nations*, Edinburgh, 1973.

9 There is a vast body of literature on the Weimar Republic. The following studies are useful: R. Bessel and E. J. Feuchtwanger (eds.), *Social change and political development in Weimar Germany*, London, 1981; E. Eyck, *A history of the Weimar Republic*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1962, 1964; and I. Kershaw (ed.), *Weimar: why did German democracy fail?*, London, 1990.

10 E. Bennett, *Germany and the diplomacy of the financial crisis*, Harvard, 1962.
11 H. A. Turner, *Gustav Stresemann and the politics of the Weimar Republic*, Princeton, 1963.
12 Quoted in E. Sutton (ed.), *Gustav Stresemann: his diaries, letters and papers*, London, 1937, pp. 503–5.
13 See A. Dorpalen, *Hindenburg and the Weimar Republic*, Princeton, 1964.
14 See A. Bullock, *Hitler: a study in tyranny*, London, 1962; J. Fest, *Hitler*, London, 1977.
15 The classic study of Hitler's rise during the Weimar period is A. J. Nicholls, *Weimar and the rise of Hitler*, London, 1968. A very good recent study is C. Fischer, *The rise of the Nazis*, Manchester, 1995.
16 For a detailed discussion of Nazi voters, see T. Childers, *The Nazi voter*, London, 1983.
17 C. Kindelberger, *The world in depression, 1929–39*, London, 1973.
18 A. Iriye, *The origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, London, 1987, pp. 6–33.
19 Quoted in J. Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, New York, 1976, p. 333.
20 Quoted in D. Smith, *Left and right in twentieth-century Europe*, London, 1970, p. 32.
21 *Time Magazine*, 19 September 1932.

4 The origins of the Second World War: 2 From peace to global war, 1933–41

The impact of Hitler

The period from 1933 to 1941 was one of deep international instability, which eventually resulted in the Second World War. The tension began with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor in January 1933. This immediately raised deep concerns that Germany would soon rearm and openly challenge the Paris Peace Settlement. However, Hitler was initially too concerned with consolidating Nazi control over Germany to take a great interest in foreign affairs. During 1933, the books of 'unsuitable' writers were burned, civil rights were suspended, opposition parties and trade unions were banned, and the democratic press was closed down. Jews were excluded from public office, Hitler's political opponents were arrested, beaten up and sent to concentration camps, and the Nazi swastika was used as the national flag. The cruelty of the Nazi regime led to a wave of moral indignation and demonstrations in many countries: a wax model of Hitler in Madame Tussaud's museum in London was daubed in red paint with the words 'Hitler the Murderer'; anti-Nazi parades were held in several major US cities; and a petition signed by 228 Jewish organisations in the USA called on President Roosevelt to institute a boycott of German goods.

In the face of this foreign opposition, Hitler decided to proceed cautiously in the realm of foreign affairs, and repeatedly made soothing speeches which insisted that Germany wanted peace. At the World Disarmament Conference, Hitler suggested that all the other major powers either disarm to match the German level of armaments set at Versailles, or that they allow Germany to rearm to the same level as all the other major powers. Ramsay MacDonald, the British prime minister, urged the French to accept this request, but they would only agree if Germany, as an act of good faith, accepted the Versailles arms limits for another four years. In October 1933, Hitler withdrew Germany from both the World Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations on the grounds that neither would treat Germany on equal terms.[1]

These moves provoked fears about Nazi intentions. To ease these worries, Hitler signed a non-aggression pact with Poland in January 1934. The Polish government thought that the agreement offered them security against Soviet ambitions, but it seems that Hitler signed the agreement to thwart a possible

Franco-Polish alliance, and to bring Poland under German influence. The agreement was viewed by the British press as a sign of Hitler's peaceful intentions, but the French were more suspicious and, in April 1934, the French government announced that it would 'henceforth assure her [France's] security by her own means'. Meanwhile, the arrival of Hitler on the international scene allowed the Soviet Union to emerge from years of diplomatic isolation. In November 1933 the USA officially recognised the Soviet Union and restored diplomatic relations. In July 1934, the Soviet Union was admitted to the League of Nations.

However, the summer of 1934 featured a series of events which once more fixed world attention on Nazi Germany. Rumours spread that Hitler was about to engineer the *Anschluss* (the union of Austria with Germany). Dollfuss, the Austrian chancellor, opposed the idea, and in June 1934 slapped a ban on the Austrian Nazi Party. A month later, he was assassinated by pro-Nazi extremists. This action provoked world-wide outrage: Mussolini, the Fascist leader of Italy, sent four army divisions to the Austrian border, and the French and Italian governments issued a joint declaration opposing any attempt to undermine Austrian independence. Hitler was forced to deny any German involvement in the murder of Dollfuss, and refuted any Nazi plan for an armed seizure of Austria.[2]

Meanwhile, a crisis erupted in domestic German politics which shocked most liberal-minded people in the democracies. Hitler ordered a lawless and merciless eradication of his political rivals (during the 'night of the long knives' between 29 and 30 June 1934): General von Schleicher, the former German chancellor; Gregor Strasser, a leading socialist figure in the Nazi Party; and Ernst Röhm, leader of the SA, were among those brutally murdered. On 2 August 1934, President von Hindenburg, the last link with any vestige of the Weimar era, died peacefully at his home in Neudeck. This greatly strengthened Hitler's power in Germany: he swiftly abolished the post of president, ended the Weimar constitution, and declared himself *Führer* ('Leader') of the German people. Each member of the German armed forces was now required to swear a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler – not the state.

The early months of 1935 witnessed a number of major developments in international affairs. In January 1935, 90 per cent of voters in the Saar region of Germany, in a plebiscite held by the League of Nations, opted for the restoration of the area to Germany. In the same month, France and Italy signed a diplomatic agreement which resolved mutual discord in North Africa, and promised co-operation in the event of German aggression. On 16 March 1935, the Nazi propaganda ministry assembled the world's press to announce what everyone already knew: Germany was rearming. The German army was now 400,000 strong (the Treaty of Versailles had limited it to 100,000), conscription was introduced, the air force and navy were undergoing rapid programmes of expansion, and Hitler claimed that Germany was no longer bound by the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. This announcement caused public outrage. Britain, France and Italy met at Stresa in April 1935, and issued a joint

declaration which opposed 'by all practical means any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe', and asserted Austrian independence. The 'Stresa Front' seemed to be a great public show of unity against German revisionism regarding the terms imposed at Versailles, but in reality it pronounced empty rhetoric. No action was taken against Germany.

In May 1935, in a speech designed to ease British, French and Italian fears, Hitler said: 'Germany needs peace and desires peace.' He also promised not to interfere with his 'beloved Austria' and proposed disarmament agreements. *The Times* wrote of 'Hitler's sincerity and peaceful intentions', but the French government thought otherwise, and signed a pact with the Soviet Union under which each side offered assistance to the other in the event of an unprovoked attack by Germany. France and the Soviet Union also signed an agreement to protect Czechoslovakia from a German attack. The British government, which deeply mistrusted the Soviet Union, was unhappy with these French moves, and decided to make a significant gesture of appeasement towards Nazi Germany by signing an Anglo-German naval agreement in June 1935 which limited German shipbuilding to a level of 35 per cent of that of the Royal Navy. This was little hardship for Nazi Germany, as it would take years to reach the set limit. The agreement was a diplomatic triumph for Hitler, because it recognised Germany's right to rearm, and also revealed the hollowness of the Stresa Front.[3]

The collapse of the League of Nations, 1935–37

In October 1935, Italy suddenly invaded Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia), the last independent nation state in Africa.[4] This was the first unprovoked attack by any European power since the establishment of the League of Nations, but it was not completely unexpected: Italy had long sought to avenge its Italian defeat by Abyssinia at Adowa in 1896. News of the attack broke during the 1935 British general-election campaign. Stanley Baldwin, the prime minister and leader of the Conservative Party, who was fighting his campaign under the slogan 'peace with collective security', was placed in the embarrassing position of being forced to make a public show of opposition towards this demonstration of unprovoked aggression. Samuel Hoare, the British foreign secretary, asked the League of Nations to impose economic sanctions on Italy. These were imposed, but proved ineffective, because many countries were not league members and because oil, a key war material, was not included in the sanctions.

The French government did not want to punish Mussolini too harshly: it regarded Italy as a vital counterweight to German designs on Austria. Hoare decided to meet Laval, the French foreign minister, in Paris, to try to find a way of easing the pressure on Italy. Hoare and Laval privately agreed to Italy gaining most of Abyssinia, except for a small strip of land along the coast (later dubbed by *The Times* 'a corridor for camels'). When it was leaked to the press, the Hoare–Laval Pact caused deep political embarrassment. After all, Hoare

and Laval were condoning Italian aggression in private, while condemning it in public. Hoare was forced to resign. The whole Abyssinian affair was a disaster for Britain and France. It showed that they only paid lip-service to the ideals of the League of Nations, it destroyed the Franco-Italian alliance, and it alienated Mussolini.[5]

The next of Hitler's surprises came on 7 March 1936, when German troops marched into the demilitarised Rhineland. The French government offered words of outrage, but decided that it would not use force to reverse Hitler's action.[6] Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, claimed that British policy was designed 'to come to peaceful agreed solutions by appeasement of justified grievances', and although he pledged British support of France in the event of a German attack, he claimed that the occupation of the Rhineland had to be accepted as an accomplished fact. The view of *The Times* that Hitler was only 'going into his own back garden' became widely accepted. By marching his troops into the Rhineland, Hitler had removed a key grievance created by the Treaty of Versailles, and was now in an excellent geographical position to launch an attack on France. The League of Nations took no action and ceased to have any significant influence on the subsequent course of events.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in October 1936 added to the sense of anarchy in international relations. The war grew out of the circumstances surrounding the collapse of yet another fragile democracy. In February 1936, Nationalists became the largest group in the Cortes (Spanish parliament), but a Popular Front coalition, consisting of republicans, socialists and communists, combined to prevent them from taking power. The Nationalists, led by General Franco, who had commanded the Spanish army in Morocco, refused to accept this decision and set up an alternative government, supported by the army. A civil war was soon under way to decide who should rule Spain. The Nationalists presented the civil war as an ideological struggle between fascism and communism, while the Popular Front viewed the war as a battle between democracy and fascism. The issues dividing both sides were very complicated, and produced deep rifts. Hitler and Mussolini provided military support to Franco, Stalin helped the Popular Front, but the British and French decided on a policy of non-intervention, not wishing to inflame the likely winner. Despite all the fears that the Spanish Civil War raised about an impending European war, it remained a local conflict which ended in a victory for Franco by early 1939. The Spanish Civil War was a notable success for Germany and Italy in their ideological battle with communism. The victory of Franco also allowed Germany and Italy easy access to a range of important war materials, including iron ore, copper, zinc, tin and mercury.[7]

The year of 1936 was one of enormous success for Hitler's Nazi Germany. In July, Austria agreed to accept the supervision of its foreign policy by Germany in return for a guarantee regarding its sovereignty. In August, the Nazis were praised for the organisation of the Olympic Games, held in Berlin. In the same month, Hitler announced a new four-year plan, which aimed to increase the domestic production of vital raw materials, including synthetic rubber, fuel oil

and iron ore, and brought industry more directly into the service of the aims of the Nazi Party. In October, Hitler and Mussolini signed the Rome–Berlin Axis, in which they loosely agreed on collaboration, which illustrated the movement of Italy away from Britain and France. In November, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which promised joint action to prevent the spread of communism, and which raised the spectre of a possible alliance between Germany, Italy and Japan. By the end of 1936, the German economy had dramatically recovered, unemployment was virtually eradicated, rearmament was pushed forward at a rapid rate, and Hitler's popularity stood at an all-time high.[8]

The US response to the growing turmoil in Europe was complex. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US president, had private worries about the threat posed by Nazi Germany to world peace, and was often willing to condemn acts of aggression by Germany, Italy and Japan. However, the key aim of his foreign policy was to keep the US out of any future war. The prevailing US attitude towards Nazi Germany up to the time of the Munich Conference in 1938 was to support the appeasement of legitimate German grievances. For example, when Hitler marched into the Rhineland, the French government urged the US government to condemn the action, but Roosevelt remained silent. A powerful isolationist group in the US Congress passed a series of neutrality acts in the 1930s, designed to ensure that the USA would remain on the sidelines in any future war.[9] As Neville Chamberlain, who became the British prime minister in 1937, put it: 'It is always best and safest to count on nothing from Americans except words.'

In the Far East, Japan was also posing a threat to peace. Spending on national defence in Japan grew from 31 per cent of GDP in 1931 to 47 per cent in 1936. In the summer of 1936, the Japanese government, now increasingly dominated by the army, promulgated the 'fundamentals of future national policy', which defined the Asian-Pacific region as Japan's 'sphere of influence', and promised the gradual expansion of Japanese interests in Southeast Asia. What is more, the Japanese government refused to renew the Washington and London naval agreements which limited Japan's naval expansion. In July 1937, the poor relations between China and Japan turned into open war. Japanese troops swiftly advanced along the coastal ports of China, but soon became bogged down. The Chinese government called on the League of Nations for help. The league proposed an international conference of major powers in Brussels, but no military help was offered. Britain and the US did provide financial assistance to China, but the war dragged on.

Neville Chamberlain, appeasement and the road to Munich, 1937–38

Appeasement and the alternatives

It was pretty clear by 1937 that international relations were in a state of turmoil. Germany and Italy were threatening peace in Europe, Japan was

at war with China, and a bitter civil war was under way in Spain. It was against this background that Neville Chamberlain, aged 68, became the British prime minister. He was a dull figure, with the appearance of a bank manager. In his case, however, appearances were misleading. Chamberlain was a man with a mission, who wanted to bring order and lasting peace to international relations through a policy known as 'appeasement'. The task of explaining why appeasement became the policy adopted by the British government to meet the deepening crisis of the 1930s is complex. Any consideration of the reasons for appeasement must mention several factors.

1 There was a widespread horror at the idea of a second world war.
2 Too much faith had been placed in the League of Nations, which proved ineffective when faced with military aggression.
3 There was a widespread feeling that Germany had been punished too harshly by the Treaty of Versailles.
4 British public opinion constantly opposed the rearmament of Britain.

Furthermore, the position of France, Britain's only firm ally, had sharply deteriorated in the face of the growing fascist threat. The Locarno Treaty, designed to protect France from attack, had been ignored by Germany, the Franco-Italian agreement had broken down, and Belgium had opted for neutrality. The German army was moving into a position of superiority, while the Spanish Civil War had raised the prospect of another hostile power over the French border. In such circumstances, the French government had no desire to go to war, and was increasingly looking to Britain to provide a new direction in Franco-British relations with Nazi Germany and Italy. Finally, the poor state of Britain's armed forces also influenced the policy of appeasement and often justified it. Britain was in no position to offer any help to France, either to defend its cities from air attack, or to defend its possessions in the Far East from Japan.

The policy of appeasement grew out of an intermingling of all these factors. This is not to suggest that it was inevitable, but in the difficult circumstances of international affairs in the late 1930s it seemed rational and logical to Chamberlain. It was not, however, the only policy available. There were two alternative directions which British foreign policy could have taken in the late 1930s. The first was to support peace by collective security through the League of Nations, but this policy had never been implemented, even when the league was strong, and stood less chance of success in 1937, when the league was weak and discredited. A second alternative was to create a 'grand alliance' of the anti-fascist powers, a policy championed by Winston Churchill, who suggested that the dictators would only respond to military force. Yet this policy amounted to a return to the pre-1914 alliance system, and very few leaders like to adopt a past policy which has already proved unsuccessful, even though in this case it might have prevented war.

The only other option was to satisfy the grievances created by the Paris Peace Settlement, and Chamberlain, along with the majority of the 'National Government', favoured this stance. A bold policy of appeasement came to be seen by Chamberlain as the only choice if war was to be avoided. He believed that unless he could negotiate a revision of the Treaty of Versailles with Hitler, then a second world war would probably break out.[10]

The sudden desire of Chamberlain to champion appeasement as an active policy with which to solve the grievances of Nazi Germany was not appreciated by Hitler. In May 1937, for example, Chamberlain invited von Neurath, the German foreign minister, to the coronation of George VI, but Hitler refused to let him go, on account of the negative coverage of Nazi Germany in some British newspapers. In November 1937, Chamberlain sent Lord Halifax, a kindred spirit, to meet leading Nazi figures, much to the annoyance of Sir Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, who felt that Chamberlain's attempt to court the dictator might end in failure. At his meeting with Hitler, Halifax said that Britain would support any legitimate German claims in Europe, provided they were negotiated peacefully.

The Hossbach Memorandum

However, Hitler treated the Halifax visit as an unwelcome intrusion into his own military plans. On 5 November 1937, Hitler summoned von Neurath, General von Blomberg, the war minister, and other leading military chiefs to a meeting to discuss his future plans. A record of the meeting was kept by Colonel Hossbach, from memory, which later became known as the 'Hossbach Memorandum'. In the document, which most historians accept as being authentic, Hitler suggested that the key aim of German policy was 'conquest in the east', which had to be achieved by some time between 1943 and 1945 while Germany still held a clear military lead over Britain and France. Hitler also told the meeting that Austria and Czechoslovakia had to be seized, and predicted that these actions might provoke a war with France and Britain.[11] Shortly after the conference, Hitler started to remove moderate members of the 'old guard' from key positions. In November 1937, Schacht, the economics minister who opposed the rapid pace of rearmament, was dismissed. In January 1938, von Blomberg was also dismissed; Hitler became minister of war, and new, pro-Nazi men were moved into the other leading positions. Von Ribbentrop, a key Nazi, replaced the moderate von Neurath as foreign minister.

The *Anschluss*

During 1938, Hitler's actions brought Europe to the brink of war. In January 1938, the Austrian police discovered Nazi plans for a seizure of power in Austria, even though Hitler had no plans at that time for an invasion. Alarmed by this discovery, Schuschnigg, the Austrian leader, met Hitler at Berchtesgaden, Hitler's mountain retreat, on 12 February 1938. At the meeting, Hitler bullied Schuschnigg into signing an agreement which brought two Nazis into the Austrian cabinet, allowed Nazis complete freedom in Austria, and gave Germany total control of Austrian foreign policy. On his return to Austria, however, Schuschnigg – quite bravely – decided to call a referendum which

asked voters to support a 'free and independent Austria'. It was a provocative move designed to gain popular support to resist German aggression. When the vote seemed likely to reject union with Germany, Hitler bullied and threatened Schuschnigg once more, and he was forced to resign. A new, Nazi-dominated Schuschnigg government, led by Seyss-Inquart, invited Germany to occupy Austrian government, led by Seyss-Inquart, invited Germany to occupy Austria. On 12 March 1938, German troops entered Austria, with Hitler driving through the packed streets of Vienna in triumph. The *Anschluss* had been achieved by bullying and intimidation, but without a single shot being fired.[12]

The response of Britain and France to the *Anschluss* was predictable. On the very day on which Hitler's troops marched into Austria, France was without a government. The French eventually uttered strong words of protest, but there was no question of military action. Neville Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin, laid most of the blame on Schuschnigg for calling the referendum. As a result of the *Anschluss*, the Treaty of Versailles was virtually destroyed, the balance of power in central Europe turned sharply in Germany's favour, and the position of Czechoslovakia was now under grave threat.

The Czech crisis of 1938

Czechoslovakia consisted of a number of mixed nationalities artificially amalgamated into a nation state by the peacemakers of Versailles. Hitler called Czechoslovakia a dagger thrust into the heart of Germany. Yet Czechoslovakia was the only democracy left in central Europe, led by the highly respected Edvard Beneš, who had played a significant role in the work of the League of Nations. Within its borders lived the 3.5 million German speakers of the Sudetenland. Since 1933 Hitler had given financial support to the pro-Nazi Sudeten German Party, led by Konrad Henlein. During the remainder of 1938, Hitler cast himself as the defender of this so-called 'oppressed minority' of Sudeten Germans. The Czech crisis was made even more complicated by the existence of a Franco-Czech alliance dating back to 1925, and the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935, which both promised to preserve the integrity of Czechoslovakia. This meant that the Czech crisis held the prospect of turning into a European war.[13] However, France had no wish to go to war to save Czechoslovakia, and the Franco-Soviet Pact only became operative if France acted first.

Chamberlain believed that the Czech problem had to be solved by negotiation. In May 1938, the Czech government claimed that Germany was ready to invade. France, the Soviet Union and Britain all promised aid to Czechoslovakia in the event of a Nazi assault. A very angry Hitler was forced to deny that any German plans for an invasion existed. Yet when the 'May crisis' died down, Hitler set a firm date for a German invasion of Czechoslovakia – 1 October 1938. Chamberlain decided that the British government should act as a mediator between the Sudeten Germans and the Czech government. To this end, Lord Runciman, the Liberal leader in the House of Lords, who had no reputation as a conciliator, was sent to Czechoslovakia in August 1938 to try

and find a settlement to the problem. The Czech government offered every possible concession, but the Sudeten German Party, encouraged by Hitler, kept asking for more, and the negotiations broke down. In his report, Runciman depicted the Sudeten Germans as an oppressed minority, and advised Chamberlain to allow them to join Hitler's Third Reich.

By September 1938, the crisis was mounting. Hitler whipped his supporters into a frenzy at the Nuremberg rally by claiming that the Sudeten Germans were 'not defenceless and not alone'. At this point, Chamberlain made his boldest move, travelling by aeroplane to meet Hitler, in order to find out what the Nazi leader wanted and to try to give it to him. The French government stayed on the sidelines. Hitler met Chamberlain at Berchtesgaden on 15 September 1938, and told Chamberlain that Germany wanted the Sudetenland to be incorporated into the Third Reich. On 21 September 1938, the Czech government was given a stark choice by the British and French governments: agree to a peaceful handover of the Sudetenland to Germany, or fight alone. Under this extreme pressure, the Czechs reluctantly agreed to the former.

Chamberlain, the self-styled 'messenger of peace', took this news to Hitler at Bad Godesberg on 22 September 1938, but he then found that Hitler had new demands, which included an immediate German occupation of the Sudetenland, with those Czechs who wished to leave only being permitted to take a single suitcase of belongings with them. Astonishingly, Chamberlain was even willing to agree to this. However, the British cabinet, the Czech government and the French government could not. War now seemed likely. 'How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is', said Chamberlain in a live broadcast on BBC radio on 27 September 1938, 'that we should be trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing.'[14]

It was left to Mussolini, who was in no position to go to war, to persuade Hitler to settle the matter peacefully at Munich. Hitler (for Germany), Chamberlain (for Britain), Daladier (for France) and Mussolini (for Italy) met on 29 September 1938 to decide the fate of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Conference was a return to old-fashioned European diplomacy, with four major European powers forcing a small nation to concede territory. It was justified on the principle that national self-determination had been denied to the Sudeten Germans in the first place. The Munich Conference simply agreed to the Sudetenland being incorporated into Germany by 10 October 1938. A vague promise to respect the integrity of the rest of Czechoslovakia was given by the four powers. It seems that Hitler, despite gaining the Sudetenland without firing a shot, was dissatisfied with Munich and was eager to push ahead with his own desire to occupy the remainder of Czechoslovakia at the earliest opportunity. In a separate meeting, Chamberlain persuaded Hitler to sign a piece of paper which declared that Britain and Germany would 'never go to war with one another again'. To Hitler, it was a worthless piece of paper, but Chamberlain flourished it on his return to Heston airport from Munich. This gesture would haunt him to his dying day.[15]

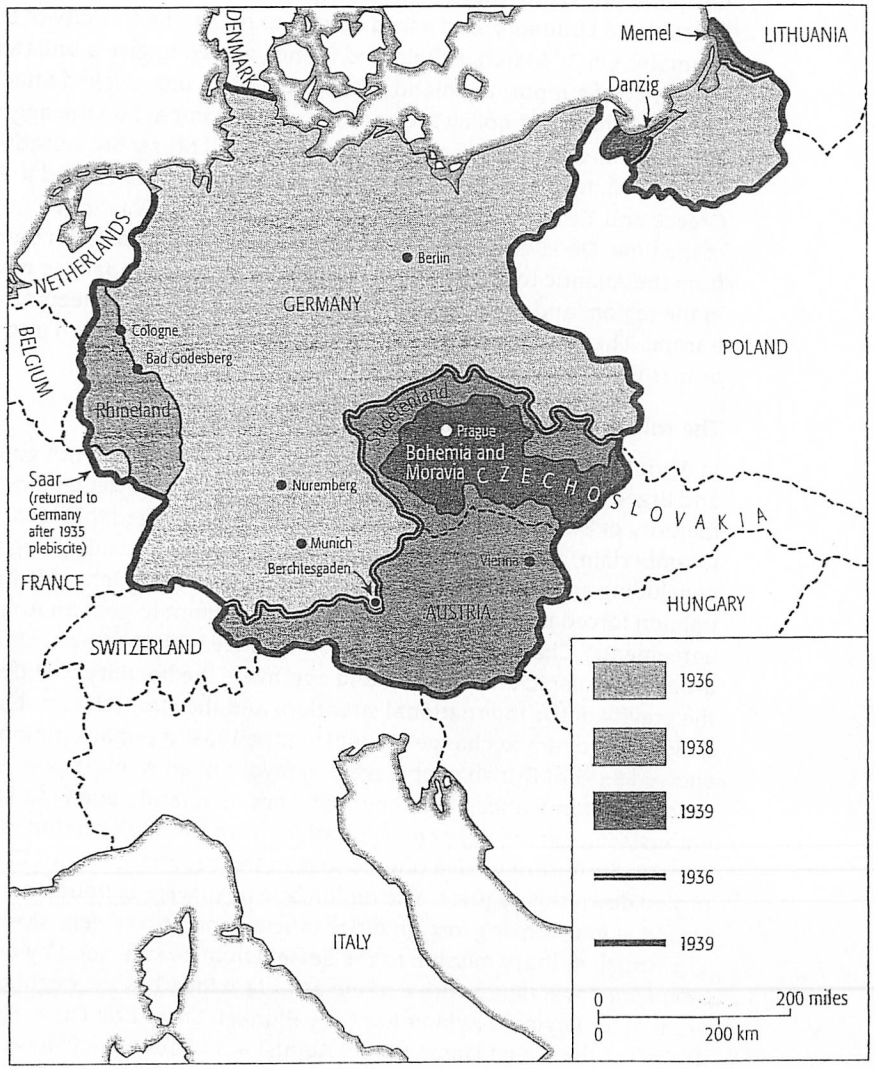
Nevertheless, the Munich agreement, despite its dubious morality, did solve a major German grievance without a major European war. It was heralded as a triumph for Chamberlain's bold new policy, and he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for 1938. President Roosevelt sent him a telegram with the simple message 'good man'. Not everyone agreed: Winston Churchill described the events at Munich as the 'blackest page in British history'; the Soviet Union believed that Britain and France were happy so long as Hitler moved eastward. The seeds of the later Nazi–Soviet Pact were probably planted in the mind of the Soviet leader, Stalin, at the time of Munich. As for Hitler, he said, as he celebrated yet another bloodless triumph: 'With a dictator nothing succeeds like success.' The Czech crisis, which went on for over six months, was a traumatic experience. The cheers and acclaim for Chamberlain were symbolic of a deep longing to avoid a second world war.

The road to global war, 1938–41

These optimistic hopes of a lasting peace in Europe did not last very long. On 9 November 1938, groups of Nazi thugs toured the Jewish areas of every town and city in Germany, and engaged in an orgy of violence and thuggery which included smashing shop windows, burning synagogues and beating up ordinary Jewish people. *Kristallnacht* (the 'night of broken glass') sent a wave of shock throughout the world. President Roosevelt denounced the Nazi attack on German Jews as an act which he thought 'could not happen in the twentieth century'. An opinion poll showed that 70 per cent of the British public were horrified by the attack and wanted no further negotiations with Nazi Germany; Lord Mount Temple, president of the Anglo-German Fellowship, resigned in protest; the House of Commons voted unanimously to condemn the action. The morality of negotiating with such an obviously brutal regime was now called into question. In the early months of 1939, a number of voices were raised against the policy of appeasement: Lloyd George suggested that appeasement was a policy which 'lacked courage'; Duncan Sandys, Churchill's son-in-law, and Basil Liddell Hart, the military correspondent of *The Times*, formed the 'Hundred Thousand Party', which pledged to fight Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler; and the Federation of University Conservatives passed a resolution against appeasement. In January, following intelligence reports from Germany which indicated a possible German attack on Holland, pressure grew on Chamberlain within the cabinet to make a greater public commitment towards the defence of western Europe. On 6 February, Chamberlain announced that Britain would support France in the event of any threat to its vital interests anywhere. This amounted to an Anglo-French alliance. This decision was followed by the creation of a large British Expeditionary Force pledged to fight to save France in the event of war and by the opening of staff talks between British and French army chiefs of staff.

On 15 March 1939, Germany occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia, Bohemia and Moravia. Hitler claimed that he was 'invited in to restore order',

but no one was convinced. The British and French governments claimed that because the Czech government fell before the German occupation, the guarantee offered at Munich did not apply. However, British, French and US public opinion was deeply outraged. Chamberlain was forced, by the strength of public opinion, to assume a position of anger and indignation towards Nazi Germany. On 17 March, in a speech made in Birmingham, Chamberlain asked if the German occupation of the Czech capital city, Prague, was the 'last attack on a small nation? Or is it to be followed by others? Are the aggressions of Germany a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by



Map 5. The territorial expansion of Nazi Germany, 1936–39.

force?'[16] The German occupation of Czechoslovakia crushed all hopes that Hitler could be appeased by concessions. It was now pretty clear that Hitler was out to dominate Europe by force. Roosevelt denounced Hitler's invasion as an act of 'wanton lawlessness', recalled the US ambassador to Czechoslovakia, and slapped a 25 per cent tax on all German goods. All Czech funds in London and French banks were frozen. Daladier, the French prime minister, put France on a virtual war footing.

Any hope that these actions would halt Hitler's aggression were quickly disappointed. On 21 March 1939, Hitler seized Memel, on the border of East Prussia and Lithuania, and asked Poland to return the free city of Danzig to Germany. On 31 March, Britain and France agreed to give a unilateral guarantee of support to Poland in the event of an unprovoked attack on it.[17] This new change of policy seemed to have little impact on the aggressive designs of the dictators, however, and on 7 April Mussolini seized Albania. On 13 April, further British and French guarantees were offered to Romania, Greece and Turkey; 'a guarantee a day keeps Hitler away' ran a popular joke of the time. On 15 April, Roosevelt agreed to send an American battle fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to counterbalance the Japanese naval threat in the region, and to thereby allow the British and French fleets to return to Europe. The British government also announced conscription into their armies for all men aged 20 and 21.

The role of the Soviet Union in the outbreak of war

In April 1939, Churchill said that the guarantee system did not go far enough, and urged Chamberlain to seek an alliance with the Soviet Union. The vast majority of British and French public opinion supported this idea. But, Chamberlain, a lifelong anti-communist, had profound misgivings about concluding an Anglo-Soviet alliance. In the end, the weight of British public opinion forced him to make a half-hearted attempt to gain an Anglo-Soviet agreement.[18] Chamberlain believed an alliance with the Soviet Union would arouse the suspicion of Poland and aggravate the hostility of Hitler. It was the gravity of the international situation, and the strength of public opinion, which forced him to change course. In June 1939, a public opinion poll showed 84% of British people were in favour of an Anglo-Soviet alliance. In these circumstances, Chamberlain, very reluctantly and with little real enthusiasm, agreed to open negotiations with the Soviet Union in the summer of 1939. Sir Anthony Eden offered to lead the negotiations, but Chamberlain turned down this request. The diplomatic talks were conducted by Sir William Strang, a low-ranking foreign office official, and proved very slow and complex. The British military mission to the Soviet Union was headed by a virtually unknown naval figure with a name as long-winded as the negotiations: Admiral Sir Reginald Aylmer Ranfurly Plunket-Ernle-Erle Drax. He did not depart for the Soviet Union until 5 August – no doubt delayed while filling out his visa application. Drax journeyed to Moscow by a merchant ship which took six days to arrive. The talks were cordial, but they broke down on 19 August

A cartoon for the London *Evening Standard* drawn by David Low in 1936. Evaluate the cartoonist's presentation of Hitler's foreign policy.

primarily because the Polish government steadfastly refused to allow Soviet troops to enter Polish territory in the event of war. However, the generally low-key approach to the discussions by the British government was probably a fatal blunder which paved the way for the Nazi–Soviet Pact.

In the summer of 1939, the Soviet Union, ignored, isolated and mistrusted for most of the inter-war period, was now at the centre of European diplomacy. Everyone assumed, especially Chamberlain, that Hitler's hostility to Soviet communism was so passionate that he would never contemplate a Nazi–Soviet pact. This view ignored Hitler's opportunism and his willingness to be flexible in pursuit of his foreign-policy aims. Hitler had already set 1 September 1939 as the date for the invasion of Poland, and knew that the Soviet Union was the only power which could offer any real assistance to Poland. With these considerations in mind, Hitler sent von Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister, to meet Stalin to conclude a pact with the Soviet Union. On 23 August 1939, the Nazi–Soviet Pact was signed. Hitler saw the pact as a temporary measure, designed to frighten Britain and France out of their guarantee to Poland. For his part, Stalin was as indifferent to the fate of Poland as Chamberlain had been towards Czechoslovakia a year earlier, and wanted to keep the Soviet Union out of a war with Nazi Germany if at all possible.[19]

The outbreak of war in Europe

In the final days of August 1939, Hitler assumed that Britain and France would not go to war to save Poland. On 29 August 1939, Hitler offered the Poles the opportunity to agree to his demands by negotiation, but the Polish government refused. Chamberlain had offered a guarantee to a small nation which was

quite willing to undertake a suicidal war with Nazi Germany, and was prepared to drag Britain and France along with it. On 1 September 1939, Germany attacked Poland. On 3 September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Italy decided to remain neutral, and the participants in the European war which began in September 1939 were confined to Germany, Poland, Britain and France. However, as Britain and France stood on the defensive in western Europe, for the time being it was really a German–Polish war. Poland was predictably crushed in less than five weeks. The start of the elimination of Jewish people in Poland began almost immediately.

The first nine months of the Second World War were dubbed the 'phoney war', as hardly a shot was fired by Britain and France against Germany. More British people died in the blackout (when city lights were extinguished as a precaution against bombing raids) during this period than on the battlefield. In April 1940, Denmark was occupied by Germany without resistance. The first time that Britain and France engaged German troops was in Norway, and they were fairly soundly defeated. In May 1940, Germany launched its major attack on western Europe. Holland and Belgium fell quickly. The French, supported by the British army, which was eventually evacuated from France at Dunkirk, were crushed by the Nazi *Blitzkrieg* in less than six weeks. At this point, Mussolini, believing that Germany had already won the European war, finally entered on Hitler's side. The Nazis occupied Paris and the French government moved to Vichy, to begin years of humiliating collaboration with Germany. By the end of 1940, most of Europe was under Nazi rule. In September 1940, a Tripartite Pact was signed between Germany, Italy and Japan. Hitler stood at the pinnacle of his power.

In May 1940, Churchill had replaced Chamberlain as prime minister of Britain. From May 1940 until June 1941, Britain stood alone, survived the aerial Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, and hoped for a miracle. It came in June 1941, when Germany suddenly, but not unexpectedly, attacked the Soviet Union. This extended the scale of the European war. The attack on the Soviet Union stands out as Hitler's most carefully calculated plan of his entire period as German leader. The Nazi attack on the Soviet Union does seem to have been a burning desire of Hitler, which he could not resist once he had conquered most of western Europe.

Despite all Roosevelt's strong words against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan, the USA still remained a spectator to these incredible events. In 1941, however, Roosevelt began to believe that the USA had to prevent the domination of Europe and the Far East by the Axis nations. To help the British, the US offered a scheme entitled Lend-Lease, by which arms were supplied to Britain by lease, sale or exchange. In the summer of 1941, the US banned oil supplies to Japan. This was a highly provocative move, which Roosevelt knew might provoke Japan into war. As the Japanese war effort in China depended on oil imports, two stark choices now faced Japan's leaders – to accept the US demands, or to seize oil supplies by advancing against British, French and Dutch possessions in Southeast Asia.

On the morning of 7 December 1941, Japan launched its famous surprise attack on the US fleet at anchor at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. President Roosevelt described the attack – which sunk, damaged or destroyed eight US battleships, three cruisers, three destroyers, and 188 aircraft – as a 'day that will live in infamy'. The USA now entered what had become a truly global conflict. On hearing the news of the US entry into the war, Churchill rejoiced, and later said that from that day onwards, 'Hitler's fate was sealed. Mussolini's fate was sealed. As for the Japanese, they would be ground to powder. All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force.'

The Second World War, which ended in 1945, resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Western Allies and in utter defeat for Germany, Italy and Japan. It was the most bloody and devastating conflict in the history of the world. We should never forget the suffering of its victims, and we should never cease to discuss the reasons why it happened.

Document case study

The approach of war

4.1 Hitler's view of the chief aims of future German foreign policy, 1925

From his book, Mein Kampf

We National Socialists must hold unflinchingly to our aim in foreign policy, namely to secure for the German people the land and soil to which they are entitled on this earth . . . State boundaries are made by man and changed by man. The fact that a nation has succeeded in acquiring an undue amount of soil constitutes no higher obligation that it should recognised eternally. At most it proves the strength of the conquerors and the weakness of the nations. And in this case, right lies in strength alone . . . The old German policy was wrongly determined by dynastic considerations, and the future policy must not be directed by cosmopolitan folksy drivel. In particular, we are not constables guarding the well-known 'poor little nations', but soldiers of our own nation . . . But we National Socialists must go further . . . Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany . . . And so we National Socialists consciously draw a line beneath the foreign-policy tendency of our pre-war period. We take up where we broke off 600 years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze towards the land of the east. At long last we break off the colonial and commercial policy of the pre-war period and shift to the soil policy of the future . . . If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states.

Source: A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by R. Mannheim, London, 1969, pp. 596–98

4.2 President Roosevelt on international anarchy, 1937

The 'Quarantine Speech', by President F. D. Roosevelt, Chicago, USA, 5 October 1937

The political situation in the world, which of late has been growing progressively worse, is such as to cause grave concern and anxiety to all peoples and nations who wish to

live in peace and amity with their neighbours . . . Without a declaration of war and without warning or justification of any kind, civilians, including women and children, are being ruthlessly murdered with bombs from the air. In times of so-called peace ships are being attacked and sunk by submarines without cause or notice. Nations are fomenting and taking sides in civil warfare in nations that have never done them any harm . . . The peace-loving nations must make a concerted effort in opposition to those violations of treaties, and those ignoring of humane instincts which are today creating a state of international anarchy and instability from which there is no escape through mere isolation or neutrality . . . There can be no stability or peace either within nations or between nations except under laws and moral standards adhered to by all. International anarchy destroys every foundation for peace. It is my determination to pursue a policy of peace and to adopt every practicable measure to avoid involvement in war. We are determined to keep out of war, yet we cannot insure ourselves against the disastrous effects of war and the dangers of involvement . . . America hates war. America hopes for peace. Therefore, America actively engages in a search for peace.

Source: R. Challener (ed.), *From isolation to containment, 1921–52: three decades of American foreign policy from Harding to Truman*, London, 1970, pp. 50–52

4.3 The Hossbach Memorandum, 1937

Minutes of a conference held in the German Chancellery, taken by Colonel Hossbach, Berlin, 5 November 1937

The *Führer* began by stating that the subject of the present conference was of such importance that its discussion would, in other countries, certainly be a matter for a full cabinet meeting . . . He wished to explain to the gentlemen present his basic ideas concerning the opportunities for the development of our position in the field of foreign affairs . . .The aim of German policy was to secure and preserve the racial community (*Volksmasse*) and to enlarge it. It was therefore a question of space . . . German policy had to reckon with two hate-inspired antagonists, Britain and France, to whom a German colossus in the centre of Europe was a thorn in the flesh, and both countries were opposed to any further strengthening of Germany's position either in Europe or overseas . . . Germany's problem could only be decided by force and this carried attendant risk . . . If the *Führer* was still living it was his unalterable resolve to solve Germany's problem of space at the latest by 1943–45 . . . For the improvement of our politico-military position our first objective, in the event of our being embroiled in war, must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously in order to remove the threat to our flank in any possible conflict against the west . . . Actually the *Führer* believed that almost certainly Britain and probably France as well, had tacitly written off the Czechs and were reconciled to the fact that this question would be cleared up in due course by Germany.

Source: *Documents on German foreign policy, 1918–45*, series D, vol. 1, London, 1949, pp. 29–30

4.4 Neville Chamberlain defines his attitude towards Czechoslovakia, 20 March 1938

Excerpt from Chamberlain's diary

You only have to look at the map to see that nothing France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans, if they wanted to do it. The Austrian frontier is practically open; the great Skoda munitions works are within easy bombing distance of German aerodromes, the railways all pass through German territory, Russia is 100 miles away. Therefore we could not help Czechoslovakia – she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany. That we could not think of unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to beat her to her knees in reasonable time, and of that I see no sign. I have therefore abandoned the idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia, or the French in connection with her obligations to that country.

Source: K. Feiling, *The life of Neville Chamberlain*, London, 1946, pp. 347–48

4.5 The Munich Conference, 1938: an Italian view

Excerpts from the diary of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian foreign minister, 29–30 September 1938

29–30 September. In the train the *Duce* ['Leader', Mussolini] is in good humour . . . He criticises British and French policy severely . . . At Kufstein we meet the *Führer*. We get into his carriage, where he spreads out on the table all the maps of the Sudetenland and the western fortifications. He explains the situation: he intends to liquidate Czechoslovakia as she now is . . . The *Duce* listens with concentration. The programme is now fixed: either the conference is successful in a short time or the solution will take place by force of arms. 'Besides', adds the *Führer*, 'the time will come when we shall have to fight side by side against England and France. All the better while the *Duce* and I are at the head of our countries, and still young and full of vigour.' But all that seems superseded by the atmosphere which has been created – an atmosphere of agreement . . . After a brief stop at the palace where the *Duce* and I are staying, we go to the *Führerhaus* [the Leader's house], where the conference will take place. The others have already arrived . . . The *Führer* comes halfway down the stairs to meet us and, with the rest of his suite, singles us, the Italians, by a marked distinction of treatment. Brief, cold handshakes with Daladier and Chamberlain – then the *Duce* goes over to a corner of the room where the Nazi leaders surround him . . . We enter the conference room . . . The *Führer* speaks – a few words of thanks and an exposition of the situation. He speaks calmly, but from time to time he gets excited and then he raises his voice and beats his fist against the palms of his other hand . . . The *Duce* affirms the necessity for a rapid and concrete decision, and with this end in view proposed to use as a basis for discussion a document which has in fact been telephoned to us by our embassy the previous evening, as the expression of the desires of the German government . . . Chamberlain is inclined to linger over legal points. Daladier defends the cause of the Czechs without much conviction, the *Duce* prefers to remain silent and draw conclusions . . . Daladier particularly is loquacious in personal conversations. He says what is happening today is due solely to the pig-headedness of Beneš [the Czech